

LOCKED GATE

On December 19, 1980

Alaíde Foppa went to buy flowers.

She disappeared.

Sixty six years old.

In a cellar, in a bloody cell, in Guatemala,

by the hands of thugs.

Or worse.

I walk by Alaíde's sweet house in Tepoztlán

refuge from city noise and endless sorrow

Mario, husband of decades, killed

in Guatemala by a car

two sons, Mario and Juan Pablo,

Guatemalan guerillas, dead

Silvia, beloved hija, hiding in Cuba

Laura and Julio, safe

in an unquiet life in Mexico.

Alaíde's house is closed.

White cotton curtains cross the fastened windows,

embroidered flowers near the sills.

Past the locked iron gate, leaves blow in corners

of the patio, brown on the stones,

undisturbed.

Now and then, someone, thinking of Alaida, tosses

a message through the patterned bars,

also undisturbed,

Thirty years ago I write a poem, lift it to the wind,
through the barred gate.
Dust now.

Alaíde loved the light of Italian art
and the music of Italian words.

Teacher, translator, scholar,

for almost half a century, she put words on paper

justice equality honor beauty
despair hope

No body. No grave. Not a strand of hair.

Only paper reminds us

of her beauty, her courage

but a century after she was born, her words,
written down,
are read.

Remembered, like Joe Hill, she's alive as you or me.

HUMMING ROOM

I

Humming room
tube twists of plastic carry
 false pink of new blood
 the lie of another promise.

Eyes open round to compass the midnight crisis.
Inch long black hairs comma the white sheet.
No blue milk taste on lips or tongue. No tears
fall on falling lashes.

Muscles starve for oxygen.
Fingers unfist, swell, open.
Skin peels back
 fiery flesh
 too fragile to contain.

 Through roughened surface,
 the bloody serum
 seeps through blistered layers.

Breaths frail. Thread-thin muscles
do not lift the three inch ribs.

Cries whimper to silence.

White box, blue dress —
 less than one square yard of cotton to keep
 the brown dirt at bay.

Rotted together now.
Dirt. Dress. Girl.

II

Quiet room

dark table with fat legs

 box big enough

 to hold a family's picnic

 standing in sunshine

 speechless.

Hearts beat strong. Lungs

breathe

air you will never need. Brothers

cannot remember

your disappeared face.

My beloved we are silent.

III

Memory's shape

With no other proof but memory exists

 that moon blue eye.

Black curl creeps over the edge of an ear.

Smile commits nothing more — or less —

 than this moment

Trust an untrustworthy future.

NIGHT TABLE

The sky darkens.
Past the meridian
dusk eases its way.

Beside the bed

essentials crown the night table
clock lamp radio
novel eyeglasses

small china pitcher with a sprig of lilac
panicles already drooping
like tired eyelids
a breath of the spring garden

tea in a china cup without a saucer
smelling of spices
faraway hills
journeys and dreams

pencil next to the leather notebook
scent of trees
whiff of the life they once had
waiting for a new life of words

a photograph
remembrance of a sweet day
the aspens glowing
your smile alight

Sleep is temporary death
a few things
unremarked
awaken us to this life

NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

*A book connects us to one another through time and space.
We hold the author's ideas in our hand
unmediated by anything except our own curiosity.*

I

The children's room

five steps above the main floor
open shelves for young patrons
librarian's desk near the door

Read pictures, read poems

hushed rustle of pages
dust motes in the window's shifting light
bindings skate across silk-smooth golden maple
quiet clicks stamp dates on paper slips

Borrow armfuls of books

Five steps down, secreted from infant eyes,
forbidden treasure

Necessary whispers only
perfect

II

Marble beasts before limestone columns
allow passage
across hundreds of steps

mimes mug for nickels
anxious lovers suspended in anticipation of one face
arms overflow with books unaligned

readers ascend to their shared home

scholars climb the white flights
earnest heads bow with weight of words

III

Double-storied coffered domes over stacks
asylum for earth's every thought
city's every scholar,
idler, pencil-pusher,
venerable, solitary,
prized, repudiated
aged and child
have a place at this table

sounds brush through silent space,
talk soft at the desk
pencils scribble
shoes cross marble floors
index fingers slide under corners
impatient to turn pages
everything we touch is paper

thoughts from yesterday and millennia before
seined in paged nets

on heads bent over books
brass lamps shine gold

consolation for the lonely
comfort for the cold
solace for the bereft

stay until the midnight closing hour

THAT DAY

Knock your elbow against the edge of the door,
the funny bone will send a thrill of shock
right to your brain.

On this hot morning
our eyes knock.

In that instant
 every bone funny
 every muscle laughing
 every hair breathless.

In the aftershock keep touching
that electric pain
lean against the doorframe
until our hearts can move again.

GARDEN BENCH

I

Narrowing path

overrun with elephant ears, birds-of-paradise,
pampas grass, plumed with decay.

Tentacles avid, relentlessly accelerate.
Sumptuous excess silences slow wind.

In trees' canopy leaves reach for sky.

Alone here, unlonely,
immolant joy.

Between seasons, angled apart, the stone rests on gray schist legs.

Each dry winter, cemented
in their shrunken rigid waterless bed
desiccated stems flake to dust.
Leaves of streamside trees
wait for July rain to decompose.

Each rainy summer night it sinks another iota
toward its ancestral home
amidst the bedrock
of the river's underground channel
tipping imperceptibly
aslant in the slippery loam.

The path a dirt track, no longer wide enough for two people to pass,
once planted, now wild

below steep rock steps a derelict fountain,
verdigris-bronze head on the wall

calcified mouth unable to spout the rainy runoff.

There the bench waited for decades.

Broken sun glints through heavy foliage.

Awake

I dream the afternoon.

Words fall through cascade of air.

Lines found in any order,
reordered,
folded away,
found again,
foundered in the torrent
found sheltered
this reader of stone in the rain.

II

Along a wide path,

white with florescent light,
white with cold empty shining air
immaculate, pristine, precise,
five people, a crowd covered in blue,
walk steady and resolute.

The tiny black mystery, size of a fingernail, sends out its life
in threads, ready to take mine in suicidal excess.

They, steadfast under blue lights, mean to murder
this malignant monster.

Awake

on the rolling platform

I dream back this sheltered garden.

Silence and noise, garden leaves,

insects and wind, muffled footsteps

A stone in the river, washed smooth
by twenty years absence,
lies wet in the sunshine.

Gentle in its muddy bed,
heavy in my hand now, its body
contains the igneous history of the world.

A wader in this stream,
I step in the icy flow and fall
against its solid actuality.